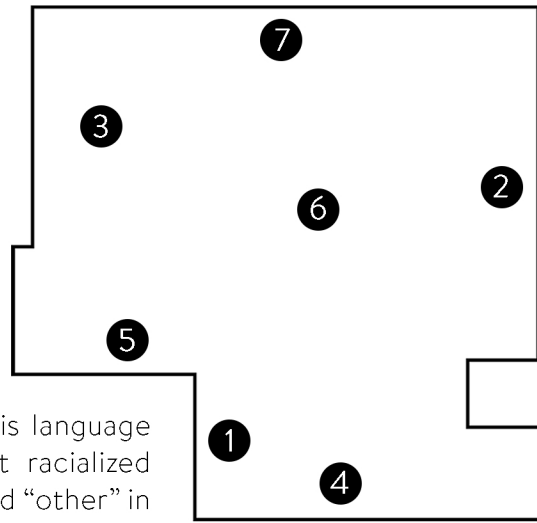


The exhibition raises a series of questions about how the natural environment might register, and inadvertently reveal, the histories and traumas of colonization. What if those of us displaced due to warfare and military interventions, perpetrated by Western powers, identify plants from our homelands in the landscapes of Canada? Could this recognition lead to further alienation, especially as we grapple with our place and sense of belonging, when we realize that these plants are now labeled as *invasive* and *foreign* species impacting more delicate native flora? How does this language feed into the racism and xenophobia directed at racialized newcomers, and broader constructions of the self and “other” in Canada? How do immigrants – those who have been here for centuries, as well as more recent arrivals – make sense of our own fraught relationship with this terrain, as settlers on Indigenous territories? *Planting Displacement* probes the complex intersections between the agonies and burdens of forced migrations, of both people and other species, and our responsibilities toward the lands we inhabit.



Indeed, underlying Norouzi’s multipronged investigations in this exhibition is the spectre of how colonialism continues to haunt the world today. While settler colonialism is denounced by Indigenous communities in Canada and elsewhere, other forms of colonialism – visible or not, current or supposedly past – are perhaps less evident, but no less violent. Colonialism has sown the seeds for a massive global displacement of people and other species, at times recklessly relocated to meet the economic and political interests, or simply the whims, of dominant powers. The exhibition exposes colonialism, with its exploitative and extractive operations, as the root cause of much human and non-human misery. It also hints at a glimmer of hope, that it is only by coming to terms with the ravages of colonialism and how it continues to manifest itself today that we might begin to address, and perhaps ameliorate, its devastating repercussions.

Planting Displacement is organized and presented by the Art Gallery of Guelph with the support of the Canada Council for the Arts and Ontario Arts Council. Anahita Norouzi acknowledges that a portion of the work presented in this exhibition was developed during her residency at the Grantham Foundation for Arts and Environment, where she was the recipient of the Grand Prize for Creation.

Cover: Anahita Norouzi, *Arid Florilegium* (detail), 2022, archival prints on paper and archival matte paper, 23 x 35 cm. Inside: Anahita Norouzi, *Constallational Diasporas* (detail), glass, *Heracleum perisucum* seed, resin, metal hooks, 4 x 4 cm, total of 510 pieces

Anahita Norouzi: *Planting Displacement* Curated by Amin Alsaden



September 14 - December 31, 2022

Colonial Roots

Amin Alsaden

Anahita Norouzi's practice examines the relationships between those who have had to leave their homes behind and the places they now inhabit. This is a deeply personal question for the artist, as well as for those of us who found ourselves in the conflicted and fragile position of immigrants or refugees obliged to adapt to new, and often hostile, surroundings. But she has been contemplating this question through a proxy: the migrations of plant species, particularly those originating in Southwest Asia, or the "Middle East." Norouzi has been studying the transnational legacies of botanical explorations, especially when scientific research and agricultural production became entangled in the colonial exploitation of non-Western geographies. At the core of her current preoccupations are the inextricable links between human beings, plants – or the planet's ecology at large – politics, economics, history, and the geographies across which all of these unfold.

For the exhibition *Planting Displacement*, Norouzi has developed an expansive body of work including archival documents, photographs, cyanotypes, sculptures, and videos, all of which investigate the plant colloquially referred to as giant hogweed. Known in the artist's country of origin, Iran, as *Heracleum persicum* (literally "Persian hogweed"), the plant spread to the West in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, through European colonial interventions, trade, and interest in acquiring so-called "exotic" species. In recent decades, it has been recognized as a noxious weed in southern Canada, affecting native plants, wildlife, and humans alike, as its toxic sap can cause serious burns. Today, there are national campaigns to not only ban the cultivation of this plant, but to curb its growth, and eventually eradicate it altogether. Norouzi sheds light on the history and changing perceptions of giant hogweed, while marking its gradual disappearance from Canadian and other Western environments.

From the intimacy of lived experience, Norouzi anchors her research in the close relationship between her family and this species. The work **1 Untitled** (2021), consisting of glass bottles of salt, pepper, and *golpar* (seeds of *Heracleum persicum*), is inspired by the containers that Norouzi's grandmother used to preserve pickles. In Iran, ground *golpar* is an essential ingredient, like salt and pepper, in preserving food – a resonant metaphor for efforts to preserve community identity in the diaspora by maintaining its distinctive cuisine. The work also recalls the artist's memories of joining members of her family as they walked the landscapes of Iran and harvested the seeds, embracing a plant prized for its culinary as well as healing and nurturing potential, despite its defense mechanisms – a relationship far removed from the fear and anxiety surrounding giant hogweed in Canada today.

Norouzi juxtaposes private recollections and her community's practices with more institutional memories of this species, as it made its way to Western landscapes, often accompanied by attempts to describe, categorize, and impose disciplinary projections onto its sensationalized form. The work **2 Arid Florilegium** (2022) captures her efforts to retrieve instances of how the plant has been inscribed by Western botanists: she contacted different herbariums in Europe and

the United States to inquire whether they held specimens of the *Heracleum persicum* collected specifically from Iran in their repositories. Receiving images of various samples acquired over the past century, she then intervened digitally into those images, removing all added information, including labels with taxonomic classifications, recreating an uncontaminated form of the plant – an act of resistance that reclaims the representations of the species.

Moreover, the artist urges us to see the plant with neutral eyes, eschewing the hysteria that surrounds it in the West today. In particular, she homes in on its seeds, the part that help it survive and propagate. One of the pivotal works in this exhibition is **3 Constellational Diasporas** (2022), a cloud of small crystalline spheres, each of which encases an individual seed of *Heracleum persicum*, collected by the artist from Iran. The glass protects these delicate seeds, while shielding Canada from them. They are suspended to evoke how easily they are disseminated by the wind, to thrive in all kinds of landscapes; but also, to suggest their fragility, and the precarious fate of giant hogweed in Canada. In the lightboxes **4 what we put in. what we leave out.** (2022), Norouzi presents two microscopic images side by side, the first taken from a seed of *Heracleum persicum* collected from Iran, and the second from a giant hogweed in Canada. The images highlight the anatomy of these reproductive pods, creating an intimate portrait, devoid of external assessments or motives.

Norouzi equally highlights the manner in which public opinion of the plant has shifted – as it gets vilified as a menace – and the active attempts to remove it from Canada and other Western countries. The video **5 Reaping What Has Been Sown** (2021) was shot in Britain, where giant hogweed was first documented and sold at the beginning of the nineteenth century after its introduction to Europe. The silent footage shows a scythe ruthlessly cutting down the plant, as though an enemy to be mercilessly annihilated. Captured with a GoPro camera, the sequence also gives the impression of a video game or heroic quest, evoking a new adventure to eradicate the plant, which loosely mirrors the earlier imperial adventure when Western hubris and curiosity about peculiar species brought them to new and unfamiliar environments.

In other works, the artist marks the loss of giant hogweed. The plaster reliefs, **6 Remains** (2021), were made from pieces of a giant hogweed plant found in Quebec, Canada. The plant was already in the very last cycle of its reproductive life when Norouzi discovered it. The fragments, with unmistakable sepulchral undertones, are traces of the actual species, pointing to an absence brought about by the herbicidal war waged on its body. In the cyanotype, **7 Hiding in Plain Sight** (2022), caught on a suspended light silk fabric, giant hogweed is already a ghost, casting a barely perceptible shadow. The work gives a glimpse into the imposing scale of these extraordinary plants – frail, despite their robust bodies – and how they became telltale monsters in Canada. The artist constructed this work out of different plants, to suggest a mythologized, Frankenstein-like giant hogweed, already fallen.

